

## Animal Abuse Wheel

The following quote is symbolic of the disturbing, yet frequently overlooked dynamics and implications of animal abuse as a strategy of coercive control in the context of domestic abuse:

I had three very big fish tanks with some fish in that I had nurtured from tiny little fish. And he used to threaten... he used to throw things in there. And he used to pull the fish out. And one day... I can't even remember what it was, it was something so stupid, like I had got home late, and the dinner wasn't ready, and he took the bleach and poured it into the water. I just had to sit there and basically watch them die, because that was what happened, it was awful (Ann, 38).

Female victim-survivors' accounts of the abuse that they endure and the abuse that animals are subjected to reinforces that the oppression of women, children and animals is interwoven in society and rooted in patriarchy (Adams, 1994; Stark, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2007; Franklin, 2007; Taylor and Fraser, 2019). While it is widely accepted across research that animals are abused to coerce and control human victim-survivors the literature about this issue currently sits separately to the coercive control literature, but it is a key issue to be addressed within our understanding and response to coercive control if we are to safeguard all victims-survivors of domestic abuse – women, children and animals (Flynn, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Gallagher et al, 2008; Hardesty et al, 2013).

### Background to the Animal Abuse Wheel

The Animal Abuse Wheel is an output from a PhD research study completed by Dr Mary Wakeham at the University of Bristol in the Centre for Gender and Violence Research.

The overall aim of this research was to explore animal abuse in the context of domestic abuse and there were two main questions that Mary set out to answer:

- 1) How and why are animals abused and what are the implications for victim-survivors?
- 2) To what extent are professionals aware about the coexistence of animal abuse and human abuse and how do professionals respond to human victim-survivor's concerns about the welfare of animals?

The research took place in the UK and adopted a mixed method approach to collecting data. There were three phases of data collection which included a national online survey, semi-structured interviews with victim-survivors of domestic abuse and interviews with professionals. The online survey was completed by 107 victim-survivors of domestic abuse. Interviews were conducted with 24 victim-survivors and ten professionals working in the fields of domestic abuse and animal welfare.

This research was one of the first studies in the UK in this area to apply a feminist research methodology that captures the lived experience of human victim-survivors and professionals working in the fields of domestic abuse and animal welfare. The sample of victim-survivors taking part in this research were unique compared to

similar research which has largely been conducted in the United States, Canada and Australia. This is because interview participants in this research were all based in the community and the abuse was historic. The samples in previous research were victim-survivors in shelter (referred to as refuge in the UK) and still in the crisis or early recovery stages from abuse. In this research participants discussed how reflection and support post separation over time enabled them to recognise and name their experiences as abuse.

### A Summary of Research Findings

Of the 107 survey participants animals were abused by the perpetrator in 94 households and animals were abused in all 24 interview participants' households. Victim-survivors who experienced animal abuse were targeted to participant in the research so statistics should not be quoted out of context. Research participants were predominantly White/English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/Irish/British, heterosexual women and it is important to point out that the results of the research are not generalisable to the population of victim-survivors of domestic abuse across the UK.

The research provided compelling evidence that animal abuse is a distinct strategy of coercive control whereby women, children and animals are victimised by male perpetrators. Animals are victims-survivors of domestic abuse in their own right and as sentient beings who are 'someone' not 'something' the abuse that they are subjected to should be prioritised alongside the abuse of humans. Animal abuse is a crime in the UK under animal welfare law and failure to hold perpetrators to account for the abuse of animals creates a platform for this abuse to continue without consequence or challenge. We should move away from a humancentric approach to understanding domestic abuse to one that includes animals. Failure to do so will continue to have devastating implications for the safety and welfare of humans and animals. This research resonates with earlier research and highlights that human victim-survivors delay leaving, stay or return to violent and abusive relationships due to concerns for the welfare of animals and the bond that they have with animals (Flynn, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2007; Gallagher et al, 2008; Hardesty et al, 2013; Taylor and Fraser, 2019).

The research positions the significance of the bond between female victim-survivors and animals as the primary reason why animals were abused by male perpetrators. A new and notable finding that emerged in this research was that animals were not merely a substitute for human companionship but provided a different type of relationship to participants than other humans could provide. The relationship was unique in the sense that it was truly unconditional and provided non-judgemental acceptance. Animals provided victim-survivors with a unique sense of comfort, companionship, love, escapism, a sense of purpose and resilience. For some participants the bond with animals regulated suicidality. Notions of 'blame' and 'shame' about the abuse of animals inhibited victim-survivor's likelihood to disclose animal abuse even when asked whether animals were being abused.

According to participants' perceptions the relationship that perpetrators had with animals was based on dominance, power and control. Perpetrators were more likely to conceptualise animals as 'property' that is 'owned' like inanimate objects. This was also evident in the act of giving animals as 'gifts' by perpetrators which this research highlights.

There are many parallels that exist between the abuse of women, children and animals in households including similarities in the way perpetrators conceptualise children and animals. Humans and animals experience similar types of abuse. Interview participants shared how the perpetrator physically abused, threatened, neglected, murdered and denied companionship to animals. A notable finding in this research is that the most common context in which animals were murdered by a male perpetrator was when the adult female victim-survivor experienced multiple forms of abuse.

Victim-survivor's experiences of seeking help from professionals varied considerably. Animal abuse was often conceptualised as 'less serious' than the abuse of humans, not taken seriously, considered outside the remit of human services, or the significance of the bond that human victim-survivors had with animals was minimised. Different sets of professionals have different agendas, cultures and legislation which causes contradictions in victims-survivors' experiences of support.

#### Developing the Animal Abuse Wheel

The Abuse of Animals Wheel was developed using the words and experiences of female victim-survivors of domestic abuse. These words and experiences were documented during the research process and further focus groups were held with interview participants taking part in the research to develop the animal abuse wheel. It is important to point out that all interview participants who were victim-survivors of domestic abuse were female. Therefore, the Abuse of Animals Wheel reflects the exploitation of female victim-survivors' bond with animals by male perpetrators.

The Abuse of Animals Wheel was developed to be a practical tool for professionals to use with female victim-survivors of domestic abuse to help identify and understand the dynamics of animal abuse in the context of domestic abuse.

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